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# SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

## II—W. B. YEATS

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I SAW Yeats many times after that first visit. He told me that he was always at home to his friends on Monday evening, and he invited me to dine with him on the Monday immediately following after that Sunday on which I first met him. No one came on that evening. He talked about acting and the theatre, and I said something that pleased him, and he complimented me in his grave, courteous manner. "That was well said," he exclaimed, and I flushed with pleasure. The praise of one distinguished man is more than the applause of a multitude of common men. Yeats's talk about the theatre, though interesting, was often remote from reality. He was then much interested in the more esoteric forms of drama, and was eager to put masks on the actors' faces. He wished to eliminate the personality of the player from the play, and had borrowed some foolish notions from Mr. Gordon Craig about lighting and scenery and de-humanised actors. He had a model of the Abbey Theatre in his rooms and was fond of experimenting with it. There was some inconsistency in his talk about acting: at one moment he was anxious for anonymous, masked players, "freed" from personality, and at the next moment, he was demanding that players should act with their entire bodies, not merely with their voices and faces. Hazlitt, in one of his essays, advocates anonymity on the stage, and when one considers how excessive is the regard paid today to the actor in comparison with that paid to the play, one is tempted to support Hazlitt's demand; but I have never understood why one should decline to exploit a personality that is rare.

There is a school of thinkers which holds that the best theatre is that one in which a player may be the hero of the piece tonight and the "voice off" tomorrow night. This is a ridiculous theory. Even if it were practicable, which it is

not, it would be a disgraceful waste of material. The manager who consented to a proposal that Madame Sarah Bernhardt should play the part of the servant with one line to say would be an ass and a wastrel. It is, perhaps, unfair to treat a man's "table-talk" as if it were a serious proposal, and I once got into trouble with Mr. Gordon Craig for doing this; but so much of Yeats's talk and writing is related to this matter of disembodiment and passionless action, that it is difficult not to treat it seriously. For my part, I have always been unable to understand how it is possible for a human being to behave as if he were not a human being.

Most of the talking was done by Yeats, and he talked extraordinarily well. He is one of the best talkers I have ever listened to, in spite of the fact that his conversation tends to become a monologue. But if you cannot talk well yourself, you are wise to listen to a man who can. He spoke at length about the men who had been his friends when he was a young man: of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley and Arthur Symonds and Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson; of Henley and Whistler and Bernard Shaw and of a host of others. He had a puzzled, bewildered admiration for "that strange man of genius, Bernard Shaw", but I never felt that he understood Shaw or was happy with Shaw's mind. He could not make head or tail of "John Bull's Other Island" when he read it in MS. (Shaw submitted the play to the Abbey Theatre when he wrote it: it was not produced there on the ground that the players were inadequate for it). G. B. S., in a debate with G. K. Chesterton, had said "I am a servant", and this phrase pleased Yeats very much. He was moved by Shaw's humility. Shaw, however, hardly entered into Yeats's early life, and most of the talk that evening was about Beardsley and Wilde and Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson and the members of the Rhymers' Club. "Most of them," said Yeats, "died of drink or went out of their minds!"

It was late when I prepared to leave him. He had been saying that a man should always associate with his equals and superiors and never with his inferiors, when I recollected that the hour was late and that I might miss the last tram from the Embankment and so have to walk several miles. I was tired, too, and a little depressed, for Yeats seemed to be a lonely man and an uneasy man. He had survived all his friends, but had not succeeded in making

any intimacy with their successors. I sometimes feel about him that he is a lost man wandering around looking for his period. When I had announced that I was going home, he astonished me by saying that he would walk part of the way with me. He had not had any exercise all day and felt that he needed some air and movement. (He hates open windows and always keeps his tightly closed.) We walked to the Embankment together, saying little, for silence had fallen on him. We walked along the Embankment for a little while, and I said some banal thing about Waterloo Bridge, but he did not make any answer; and I did not say any more, but contented myself with observing the difference between his walk when he is moving slowly and his walk when he is moving quickly. He is very dignified in his movements when he walks slowly: he holds his head erect and carries his hands tightly clenched behind his back; but when he begins to move quickly, the dignity disappears and his walk becomes a tumbling shuffle. That, I suppose, is because of his poor sight.

My tram came along, and I said "Good-night" to him, and he answered "Good-night" in a vague fashion. I think he had completely forgotten me.

## II

He had told me that he was going on the following day to Manchester to lecture to some society there, and I was sufficiently interested in his opinions to get a copy of the *Manchester Guardian* containing a report of what he had said. I was amused to find that his lecture was a repetition of all that he had said to me on the Monday before the day on which he lectured. He had "tried it on the dog", and I was the dog. All of Yeats's speeches are carefully rehearsed before they are publicly delivered. He told me once that Oscar Wilde rehearsed all his conversation in the morning and then, being word-perfect, went forth in the evening to speak it. I imagine that Yeats does that, too, on occasions. It is a laudable thing to do in many respects, although it tends to make talk somewhat formal and liable to be scattered by an interruption. When Yeats rehearses a speech before making it in public, he is paying a great tribute to his audience by declining to offer them scamped or hastily-contrived opinions. Those who listen to him may be deceived into believing that he is speaking spontaneously,

but they may be certain that what he says has been carefully considered, that he is speaking of things over which he has pondered and not just "saying the first thing that comes into his head".

Most men of letters do something of this sort. I have listened to George Moore saying things which I subsequently read in the preface to the revised version of one of his novels; and I remember meeting "A. E." in Nassau Street, Dublin, one evening and being told a great deal about co-operation which I read in his paper, *The Irish Homestead* on the following morning.

I saw Yeats many times after that. I completed the MS. of *Mixed Marriage* and, very much embarrassed, read it to him in his rooms. I read it very badly, too, and I am sure I bored him a great deal; but he was kind and patient and he made some useful suggestions to me which I did not accept. I had too much conceit, as all young writers have, to be guided by a better man than myself. I know now that I would have done well to do as he advised me to do. He warned me against topical things and against politics and urged me to flee journalism as I would flee the devil; and he advised me to read Balzac. He was always advising me to read Balzac, but I never did. . . .

### III

My memories of those days when I first knew Yeats begin to be disconnected, and I find myself putting down things which happened after other things which I have still to relate; but I have never found a consecutive narrative very interesting, which, perhaps, is why I cannot read Pepys' Diary or Evelyn's Diary. I like to take things out of their turn, to go forward to one thing and then go back to an earlier thing. One can only connect one incident or memory with another by taking them out of their order and doing violence to the natural sequence of things. Life is not so interesting when all the factors between 1 and 100 are in sequence as it is when 26 and 60 are taken out of their place and put into coherence, temporary or permanent, with each other.

Yeats said to me one evening that a man does not make firm friendships after the age of twenty-five. There is a good deal of truth in that statement, but I doubt whether it is generally true. It is true of Yeats, for his mind turns

back continually to the men who were his contemporaries twenty-five years ago, but it was not true of Dr. Johnson, who shed his friends as he grew in stature of mind, and perhaps what Johnson said to Sir Joshua Reynolds is more generally true than what Yeats said to me. "If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself alone. A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair." I do not think that anything is so remarkable about Yeats as his aloofness from the life of these times. He has very little knowledge of contemporary writing. I doubt whether he has read much or even anything by H. G. Wells or Arnold Bennett or John Galsworthy or Joseph Conrad. He said to me one night that after thirty a man ought to read only a few books and read them continually. Someone had said this to him . . . I have forgotten who said it . . . and he passed on the advice to me; but he added, after a while, that "perhaps the age of thirty was too young and suggested that the age should be raised to forty." It seemed to me to be very wrong advice.

An active mind will surely keep itself acquainted with new books and familiar with old books. I have heard many men, particularly schoolmasters and classical scholars, say with pride that they never read modern books. Such people boast that when a new book is published, they read an old one. They are, in my experience, dull people, sluggardly in mind, and pompous and set in manner. In many cases, particularly if they are schoolmasters, they neither read new books nor old ones. Dr. Johnson and his friends, however, appear to have been familiar with all the current literature of their time: history, fiction, poetry, drama, philosophy and theology; as well as with the ancient writings. They would not have *boasted* of their ignorance of the work of their contemporaries. In Yeats's case, however, this unfamiliarity with the work of men writing today is explainable when one remembers that he cannot read easily because of his sight. When I first knew him, a friend of his came several times a week to read to him out of a copy of the Klemm Press edition of William Morris's *Earthly Paradise*.

He had, like most young men of his time, been much influenced by William Morris, the only man for whom I ever heard him profess anything like affection, but I

remember hearing him say once that he no longer got pleasure from reading or listening to Morris's poetry.

#### IV

One night, I was at his rooms when G. M. Trevelyan, the historian and biographer of Garibaldi and John Bright, was present with his wife, a daughter of Mrs. Humphry Ward. Yeats talked much and well, and I remember his story of a dream he had had. He often told stories of his dreams, but some of them smelt of the midnight oil. A friend of his, he said, was contemplating submission to the Catholic Church. He had tried to dissuade her from this, but she went away to another country in a state of irresolution. One night, he dreamt that he saw her entering a room full of beautiful people. She walked around the room, looking at these beautiful people who all smiled and smiled and smiled, but said nothing. "And suddenly, in my dream," he said, "I realised that they were all dead!" "I woke up," he proceeded, "and I said to myself, 'She has joined the Catholic Church' and she had." Trevelyan thought that the description of the Catholic Church as a room full of beautiful people, all smiling and all dead, was the most apt he had ever heard.

Another Irish dramatist, Mr. Norreys Connel, when I told him of that dream, told me of a dream he had had. He said that he found himself in a room where there were many cardinals and bishops in splendid robes, and for a while he was impressed by their magnificence. Then he said to them, "Yes, your robes are very beautiful, but underneath them there is simple flesh like mine!" The moment he said that, the robes fell off the cardinals and the bishops, and he saw that they were all skeletons!

#### V

Another night, when I was in his rooms, Ellen Terry's son, Gordon Craig, came to see Yeats; and Yeats brought the model of the Abbey Theatre down from his bedroom to the candle-lit sitting room, and Craig experimented with lighting effects. Gordon Craig is a man of genius, but he is a very difficult and childish person, whose view of the theatre is as damnable as the view of the most vain of the lost tribe of actor-managers or their successors, the shop-keeper syndicates. Scenery and lighting effects were of

greater consequence to Gordon Craig than the play itself! His designs for scenery were very beautiful, indeed, but they were suitable only to romantic and poetical plays. Craig designed the scenery for Sir Herbert Tree's production of *Macbeth*, but there was a quarrel between Sir Herbert and him before the play was performed, and Craig withdrew and betook himself to Florence in a mighty temper. Yeats told me that Craig was very anxious to let everyone know that he had returned the money he had received for designing the scenery and that Sir Herbert had used Craig's ideas for the scenery in his own production. Reinhardt, the German producer, had also used some of Craig's inventions. I saw Reinhardt's production of *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden and thought that it was a bloody and messy business. The Chorus had the appearance, not of expressing emotion, but of doing physical exercises! It was said that Craig, as a condition of his production of *Macbeth*, had insisted that Sir Herbert should keep out of his own theatre for a fortnight! Whether this story be true or not, I do not know, but I can believe that it is, for it is consonant with a great deal of the sheer silliness that is mingled with the genius of Gordon Craig.

I remember that Craig, when he had manipulated Yeats's model theatre to his liking, stood back from the scene he had made, and said, "What a good thing it would be if we could take all the seats out of the theatre so that the audience could move about and see my shadows!" Yeats dryly replied that this was hardly a practical proposal. I was irritated by this stupid remark of Craig's which was in keeping with his general theory of the theatre. It seemed to me that he would, were he less difficult to work with, be as great a nuisance and danger to drama as any actor-manager in London. Sir Henry Irving and Sir Herbert Tree, turning the attention of the audience away from the play to the player and to the scenery, were not any worse than Gordon Craig, anxious to turn the attention of the audience to his shadows. I was glad when that remarkable man was carried off by Mr. Albert Rothenstein and Mr. Ernest Rhys to exhibit himself somewhere else.

Yeats was bitten with Craig's theories about lighting and scenery, and a large sum of money for so poor a theatre as the Abbey, was spent on some of Craig's "screens" for use in plays like *Deirdre*. They were never used for anything



else. When I went to Dublin to manage the Abbey, I was very anxious that we should employ a competent scene-builder to make some good "sets" for us, but Yeats said that scenery was of no consequence: the dirty hovel which we always employed to represent an Irish cottage or farm house would do well enough. I thought there was some oddness in this opinion when I remembered that the theatre had been almost bankrupted in order to purchase "screens" from Craig for occasional performances of Yeats's one-act plays. He would spend hours in rehearsing the lighting of a scene for his play: this "lime" was too strong and that "lime" was too weak or there was too much colour or there was not enough or the mingling of colours was not sufficiently delicate. One day, when he had worn out the patience of every one in the theatre, with his fussing over the lighting of the scene, he suddenly called out to the stage-manager, "That's it! That's it! You've got it right now!" "Ah, sure the damned thing's on fire," the stage-manager answered.

## VI

I have written already that Yeats is not happy with an individual: he must have an audience; and I remember now something that he said to me which supports my belief. We had been talking about Synge and his habit of listening at key-holes and cracks in the floor in order to hear scraps of conversation that he might put into his plays. I said I had been told that Synge, though excessively shy and silent in company, was a very companionable person with an individual. He was an excellent comrade on a country road, talking easily and naturally, and had the gift of friendliness with plain and simple people. Laborers and countrymen would talk to him as easily as they talked to one another, and would confide in him. I wondered whether there were as many entertaining tales to be heard from working-people in England as were to be heard from working-people in Ireland. Yeats thought that perhaps there were. He told me that the woman who cooked his meals and cleaned his rooms had begun to tell some story of a love affair to him, but that he had been too diffident to encourage her to go on with it. He thought that if he had talked to her more than he had, she would have told him many stories of her youth in the country; but all his talk to her had been of food and household things. He is not a man in whom poor men and

women confide. His civility to them is magnificent, but it overawes them and makes them as uneasy in one way as it pleases them in another. He is an excellent entertainer in a crowded room, but he is a poor companion on a road. He can talk well to a company of educated men and women, but he is tongue-tied in the presence of those who have little learning.

## VII

When I survey my acquaintance with Yeats, I find strangely diverse thoughts rising in my mind. I am drawn to him and repelled by him. He stimulates me and depresses me. I am moved by the beauty of his work and distracted by its vagueness. I find in his writing and in his speech, great spiritual loveliness but curiously little humanity, and I have often wondered why it is that while Irishmen, even such as I am, are deeply moved by his little play, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, men of other countries . . . not only Englishmen . . . are left unmoved by it, unable, without a note in the programme, to understand it. I have seen this play performed very many times. I never missed seeing it, when it was done at the Abbey during the time that I was manager there. It moved me as much when I last saw it as it did when I first saw it; and I do not doubt that if I live to be an old man, it will move me as much in my old age as it has moved me in my youth. But it does not move men of other races. That is a singular thing. It denotes, I suppose, that while there is much that is national in Yeats's work, there is little that is universal.

One rises from his work, as one comes from his company, with a feeling of chilled respect that may settle into disappointment. It is as if one had been taken into a richly-decorated drawing-room when one had hoped to be taken into a green field. I have read Blake's poems and then I have read Yeats's poems and sought to see the resemblance that I am told is between them; but have not found it. Blake wrote about things that he felt, but Yeats writes about things that he thinks; and thought changes and perishes, but feeling is permanent and unchangeable; thought separates and divides men, but feeling brings them together; and it may be that Yeats's aloofness from men is due to the fact that he thinks too much and feels too little.

ST. JOHN ERVINE.